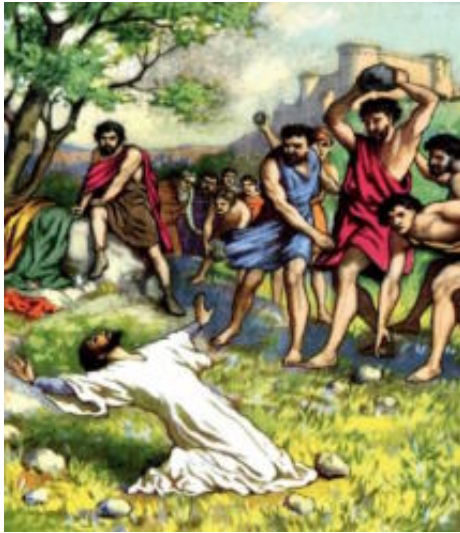


LESSON 10



JESUS APPEARS TO STEPHEN

Scripture Texts: Acts 6:8-15; Acts 7:51-60

Stephen's vision of Jesus was evidence that Jesus still lived as much as ever, and that He went to Heaven from the earth. The church knew this by faith in His Word, by the works He continued to do through them, and by the Presence of the Holy Spirit Whom He had promised to send. This sight of Him, as studied in today's lesson, was added evidence to them and to us. The whole history of the church is one long proof that Jesus lives. A few times, He gave added proof in a visible appearance. We study one today, that of His appearance to Stephen, the first person in the Church of God to wear the crown of martyrdom. Witnessing to the truth has in all ages raised opposition. Stephen summoned his generation to new spiritual heights.

MEMORY VERSE: *And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.* *Acts 7:56*

A Faithful New Witness

We read in Acts 6:1 that **when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring . . .** Murmuring concerning others' success always leads to trouble. Certain of the Greek-speaking Jews believed that their widows were being neglected in the distribution of food and other necessities in favor of the widows of other Jews. The Apostles brought the matter before the whole church and asked them to seek out seven men who were full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, and put them in charge of this affair.

Acts 6:8-11 And Stephen—a Greek-speaking Jew, one of the seven chosen for this special work of distributing food to the needy, made this an opportunity to do a great spiritual service. The name Stephen means "crown." **Full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles**—a true and active saint. He had power because the Holy Ghost had come upon him (verse 5). **Then there arose** Greek-speaking Jews—**disputing with Stephen**. They still were not satisfied. This kind of spirit in people cannot be satisfied by attempting to appease it. Active, successful work for the Lord always brings opposition. **And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake**. When his opponents were not able to withstand his wisdom, their thoughts turned to violence. **Suborned men**—procured privately or unlawfully and bribed them to twist the words of Stephen. They claimed that they had **heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God**, which indicates that these men put Moses and God on the same level. This was true blasphemy.

Stephen Before the Council

Acts 6:12-15 They stirred up the people . . . caught him, and brought him to the council—to the Sanhedrin. **False witnesses**—they twisted what had been said about the temple and the Law, Jesus' words about the temple of His body (John 2:19-21), and the relation of the Gospel to the Law. Only the Holy Spirit can reveal these things, and they did not understand them. **Saw his face as . . . the face of an angel**—the Holy Spirit showing in his face. When the high priest asked if these things were so, Stephen took the opportunity to preach a sermon by recounting the history of Israel to show (1) that the favor and worship of God are not confined to places, as the temple, and (2)

that Israel had always wandered from God and rebelled against Him.

The Council Before Stephen

Acts 7:51-54 Stephen ended his sermon with a direct accusation—**Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised**—stubborn and unpurified—**ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did**—as he had just told them earlier. **Prophets . . . persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed . . . coming of the Just One**—who foretold of Jesus' coming—**of whom ye . . . betrayers and murderers**. Stephen boldly accused them of Christ's Crucifixion, which was true, and also of the murder of those who had spoken the Law of God down through their history. **Received the law by . . . angels**—angels had brought the message direct from God—**and have not kept it**—yet they tried to limit Stephen to it. Christianity was not to be a mere secondary associate of Judaism—it was to go forth and conquer the world, and Stephen recognized this early. His words struck a tender spot. **They were cut to the heart**. Greatly angered **they gnashed . . . with their teeth**—stooped to behavior of enraged animals. When they heard unpleasant truths spoken about themselves, the religious council turned into a furious mob.

Jesus Appears to Stephen

Acts 7:55-56 Stephen, **full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly**—intently looked to God—**saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing . . . said . . . I see the heavens opened . . . Son of man standing on the right hand of God**. Stephen's eyes were turned to Jesus, and the eyes of Jesus were turned to Stephen. His hands were held out to welcome Stephen to his eternal reward. This is symbolic of the eternal Christ who is standing at this very moment, offering His support and power to every one of us as we struggle against evil and adversity. **Cried out . . . and stopped their ears**—as millions through the ages have done when the truth becomes unpleasant to their hearts. Since they had no arguments to withstand him, they would drown him out with noise. **And ran upon him**—a wild mob—**cast him out of the city**—killings were done outside the city—**and stoned him**.

Stephen's Spirit

Acts 7:57-60 Witnesses—witnesses were to cast the first stones. They **laid down their clothes**—removed their outer coats **at . . . feet of Saul**. (See Acts 22:20.) We will hear more of Saul in a lesson to come. **They stoned Stephen, calling upon God**—his faith still firm in God—**saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit**—reminding us of Jesus' dying Words. **Lord, lay not this sin to their charge**—also reminds us of Jesus' prayer for His murderers. Stephen had no bitterness or desire for revenge, only love and forgiveness. **He fell asleep**—he died. In Acts 8:2 we learn that **devout men** buried Stephen with **great lamentation**. Men like Stephen are greatly loved (as well as greatly hated), greatly missed, and greatly welcomed in Heaven.

Let us consider the similarity of Stephen's death with that of Jesus. Stephen was condemned by the council as was Jesus. The mob cried out against Stephen as it had some time earlier against Jesus. They dragged Stephen out of the city to stone him, just as they dragged Jesus out of the city to crucify Him. Stephen died praying for his enemies; the Words on the lips of Jesus were for the forgiveness of His murderers.

Stephen had a brief career. He preached but one sermon. But his soul burned as a fiery furnace for the cause of his Lord. Are you willing to suffer for your devotion to the Lord Jesus?

This lesson is adapted from a lesson by Mary Lehmann.
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